

present in the planning of experiments. "We need to develop ways of better training researchers in methodology to avoid this," he said.

Sir David Weatherall, founding director of the Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine at Oxford University, said: "For medicine it's a way of life to be supported by the pharmaceutical industry. If you've been looked after by these people, unconscious bias is dangerous." He said that universities had to wake up to the issues and ensure they had had proper systems in place to monitor funding streams coming into departments from industry and government. "There are problems – perhaps it's inevitable as things have moved so fast in the past five years and it's now time to stand back and deal with them."

In spite of increasing government funds for research over recent years, industry funding is also increasing. It was reported last month that the Wellcome Trust Biocentre at Dundee University had won one of the biggest ever industrial research deals worth £15 million over the next five years from Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline, Zeneca, Boehringer Ingelheim and Merck to support research on protein phosphorylation. Such projects come at a time of increasing problems for non-industrial funding agencies.

The meeting considered a register of interests might help but Sir David King, the government's chief scientific adviser, said that this might be too intrusive. "If there's a scientist just carrying out his or her normal business and occasionally they receive grants from different companies, I don't think that in any way means they are beholden to those companies or biased."

He supported concerns raised by Professor Bateson but valued the energizing effect of commercial partnerships. "What we mustn't lose sight of is the tremendous excitement that arises from working at the coalface of research but at the same time finding there are real-world applications for what you are doing," he said.

## Budget threatens Max-Planck closures

Germany, the largest country in the European Union, has been suffering deep and long-term economic problems since reunification more than a decade ago. Budget cutbacks now threaten some of its most prestigious research institutions which may have to close some of their departments to cope with threatened cuts. **Michael Gross** reports.

Four months into the new year, German funding agencies including the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Max-Planck society (MPG) are still unable to finalize their budget for 2003. Last November, the federal government announced a budget freeze (Current Biology 13, R43), but this decision, which is in contradiction to pre-election promises of a 3% increase, has so far failed to find the approval of the committee of federal and Länder governments (Bund-Länder-Kommission, BLK), which convened twice without coming to an agreement.

Sources suggest that the DFG has managed to carve out a special solution for itself, with a possible budget rise of up to 2.5%. At the Max-Planck society, however, the preliminary budget is set on the assumption that the budget freeze will be implemented. The inevitable response of the society will be to proceed with a consolidation programme which was outlined by MPG president professor Peter Gruss last December in response to the first announcement of a freeze.

Pointing to the fact that the budget conditions had already been tight for many years, Gruss announced the closure of 20 departments (Abteilungen), representing just under 10% of the society's research facilities. Most of the closures will take advantage of the retirement of existing directors. The general policy of the society has always been that departments, each of which is dedicated to one topical research field, may be shut down on retirement of the director, to make place for a new department focussed on a new field. So the main difference now is that — over the next seven years or so —

20 departments will be closed without replacement, which will reduce the size of institutes and possibly lead to the closing down of a few smaller ones. It is expected that the Senate, the steering committee of the society, will approve the consolidation plan and this year's budget at its meeting on June 5th. After this meeting, the president will decide on the closures after consultation with the institutes concerned. So far, no specific closures can be officially confirmed.

While there had been fears that the need for consolidation might put the 'reconstruction plan' for the former East Germany at risk, the society's press secretary, Dr Bernd Wirsing, insists that "this plan will go ahead, although some of the new institutes may end up having fewer departments than we originally planned." Overall, most of the programme for East Germany has already been implemented, and the 20 institutes that sprang from it are up and running, teeming with 4,000 employees. Thus, the East/West division is no longer a central issue and the new consolidation program will not include any geographical discrimination in either direction.

Even after a 10% cutback, the Max-Planck society will undisputedly remain the major player for fundamental research in Germany. The challenge for the society is, however, to remain competitive internationally. It is Germany's most efficient dam against the brain drain, and any cost-cutting that undermines this function might in the end cost more than it saves.

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